Why Continuous Learning Is Critical for Entrepreneurs and Their Teams

Staying hungry for new information can give you (and your business) an edge in an ever-changing market

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Shaquille O'Neal. What do you associate with this famous name? Most likely, you rank him among the greatest basketball players of all time. Or, you picture his imposing size: 7ft 1inches (2.16 metres) and 325 pounds (147 kg). Maybe now you think of Shaq as a sports analyst and co-host of *Inside the NBA*. O'Neal is all these things, but he's also a lifelong learner.

When O'Neal left Louisiana State University in 1992 to join the NBA, he promised his mother that he would eventually finish his education. In 2000, he received a bachelor's degree from LSU through distance learning courses – while playing with the Los Angeles Lakers. O'Neal later earned an MBA, a PhD, and studied cinematography and mixed martial arts. He has appeared in a wide range of film and TV roles, released five studio albums, and became a reserve police officer. If that's not enough, he's also an entrepreneur and investor.

Shaq clearly loves to try new things – and his story proves that it's never too late to broaden your horizons. Long after we leave our high school hallways or college classrooms, learning should play an important role in our lives.

Motivational speaker Jim Rohn once said that the world's most successful people are lifelong learners. They understand that an ongoing education is their own responsibility. "Formal education will make you a living; self-education will make you a fortune," said Rohn.

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Why knowledge is invaluable

In the Zen Buddhist philosophy of "Beginner's Mind," we must approach every new situation, project or experience as beginners. Our minds should be open, ready to absorb fresh ideas and perspectives. Adopting a Beginner's Mind increases our creativity, humility and gratitude.

At my company, JotForm, we regularly hire world-class consultants to share new skills, strategies and expand our vision. In areas where we don't have deep competency, like SEO, this approach has been highly successful. As a CEO and bootstrapped entrepreneur, I'm always trying to stretch my knowledge, too. I read blogs, industry sites, startup publications and have at least one nonfiction book on the go at all times. I also try to stay active on interesting discussion forums.

In today's knowledge economy, continual learning is an imperative, not an option. According to futurist Peter Diamandis, rapid demonetization is now making even previously expensive goods and services substantially cheaper, and sometimes even free. As Diamandis explains, Craigslist demonetized classifieds. iTunes demonetized the music industry, and perhaps most importantly, Google demonetized data collection, research and access to information.

At the same time, knowledge is increasingly valuable — especially when it drives innovation or is applied to leverage

new technologies. That’s why learning is the single most important investment you can make in your business. Whether you’re studying digital marketing or mastering a new language, we can all learn how to be better learners.

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Strategies for better learning.

Metacognition is the practice of thinking about our thinking. “It’s a matter of asking ourselves questions like: *Do I really get this idea?*” author and advisor Ulrich Boser writes in Harvard Business Review. “*Could I explain it to a friend? What are my goals? Do I need more background knowledge? Or do I need more practice?*”

Metacognitive processes like planning, monitoring, and reflecting can enhance our learning efforts — on top of raw intelligence and how much time we apply to a topic. In studies spanning two decades, Marcel Veenman, director of research & training at the Institute for Metacognition Research, found that well-developed metacognitive skills can also help us to acquire knowledge faster and cope more effectively with unfamiliar learning tasks.

Bottom line: thinking about how we learn matters. And if you want to grow a business, stay competitive, or drive innovation, you have to keep learning. Here are four ways to continue your education, each and every day.

1. Repetition

At some point, almost everyone has crammed for an exam or presentation. Searing information into our brains — up to the last possible moment — is a natural response to a deadline. But reviewing key information over multiple, spread apart

sessions, known as “spaced repetition,” is a far more effective approach.

According to John Medina, author of *Brain Rules*, repeated information exposure in set intervals is the best way to set memories in our minds. “Learning occurs best when new information is incorporated gradually into the memory store rather than when it is jammed in all at once,” writes Medina.

Maybe you’ve decided to learn Japanese. To apply spaced repetition, start by making a review schedule. Every day, set aside time to study, alternating between vocabulary and grammar. Focus without distractions for 30 minutes, or whatever time period works best for you.

Next, decide how you’ll store and organize information. Old-school flashcards will do the trick, but you can also use software like SuperMemo, Evernote or Duolingo. Finally, establish a way to track your progress. Seeing improvement can motivate you to continue, until you can hail your waiter with a confident “*sumimasen*” and order the *tsukune* with ease. Establishing a system does requires some time upfront, but spaced repetition can help you to learn faster and, most importantly, retain what you’ve taken in.

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2. Reflection

After all that studying, your brain needs time and space to consolidate the information. Sleeping, for example, is a time of total cognitive rest. It’s also when experts say our brains “tidy up” the knowledge we’ve acquired. In a 2016 study of people studying foreign languages, sleeping between learning sessions not only cut their practice time in half, but also promoted better long-term retention. On the flip side, sleep deprivation can impair your ability to learn new information, both before and after you learn something new.

It’s important to note that learning isn’t a synonym for memorization. What we do with our knowledge also matters deeply. And we often assume that learning only occurs while we’re actively stuffing new ideas and concepts into our brains. In fact, a lot happens during moments of mental quiet.

If you’ve ever had an “a-ha” moment while showering, washing the dishes or gardening, you know exactly what I’m talking about. In 2016, productivity expert Scott Barry Kaufman learned that 72 percent of people get creative ideas in the shower. These epiphanies often happen while we’re doing unrelated, and often mundane, activities, because our brains make new connections between information we’ve already consumed.

Some of my lightbulb moments have also occurred during or immediately after a vacation. That’s just one reason why deliberate rest is so important both for founders and team members. As Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, author of “Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less,” explains, “If you want rest, you have to take it. You have to resist the lure of busyness, make time for rest, take it seriously, and protect it from a world that is intent on stealing it.”

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3. Teaching

Albert Einstein once said, “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” Wise words from a famously brilliant man. Any teacher would agree that the best way to learn something is to explain it to someone else. That principle is reinforced by the Learning Pyramid, which says we typically retain 90 percent of what we learn when we teach someone else, or use that knowledge immediately.

In contrast, we retain only 10 percent of what we learn from reading alone, and just five percent of what we learn in a

lecture. That’s why acting on new knowledge is essential. Immediate application is also the basis of the Feynman Technique, which is named for Nobel prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman. The technique can help you learn deeper and faster in four simple steps: teach the subject to a child, review and identify your knowledge gaps, organize and simplify into a straightforward story, and transmit to someone else.

At JotForm, I use “co-piloting” to pass along important skills. It’s also an effective way to delegate tasks and free my time for more strategic work. In short, I sit beside a colleague and walk them through each step, which inevitably improves my knowledge, while highlighting any shaky spots.

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4. Transfer

Elon Musk is a cross-industry expert. By his mid-40s, he had built multi-billion-dollar companies in software, energy, transportation, and aerospace. How does he stay on top of four unique fields? With a technique called learning transfer, which takes what you study in one context and applies it to another.

For example, you could deepen your sales skills and apply them to investor presentations. Or, you could study a mindfulness technique and use it to lead team meetings. The options are endless. As for Musk, he’s developed a two-step process for learning transfer. First, he distills the knowledge into its core principles. Then he reconstructs it for a new industry.

As nearly every field merges with technology, machines will soon replace familiar products and services. Only multifaceted thinkers with cross-industry expertise will continue to thrive. Entrepreneurs already have a clear advantage in this new world, but our ability to analyze, innovate, and adapt can

make all the difference.

Just like Shaq, lifelong learning is a sure way to stay engaged and relevant, even as constant change becomes the rule, not the exception.

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